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Stalin's Holy War: Religion, Nationalism, and Alliance Politics, 1941–1945 (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Brandenberger, David. Review of *Stalin's Holy War: Religion, Nationalism, and Alliance Politics, 1941–1945*, by Steven Merritt Miner. *Journal of Cold War Studies* 7, no. 3 (2005): 196-97.

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Steven Merritt Miner, *Stalin's Holy War: Religion, Nationalism, and Alliance Politics, 1941–1945*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. 407 pp. \$55.00.

Reviewed by David Brandenberger, University of Richmond

In September 1943, Josef Stalin invited three hierarchs from the Russian Orthodox Church to the Kremlin to discuss the future of the faith. According to one account, Metropolitan Sergii was unsure whether to wear church vestments to the meeting and decided in the end to wear civilian clothes instead. Stalin smiled knowingly upon seeing the future patriarch in such unpretentious attire and gestured toward the ceiling, commenting, “You’re more afraid of me than you are of him” (Boris Sokolov, “Dogovor s d’iavolom,” *Novoe russkoe slovo*, 4 September 2003, p. 6). Even if entirely apocryphal, this story captures the awkwardness of the meeting quite effectively.

The Kremlin tête-à-tête and the iconoclastic revival of the Russian Orthodox Church that followed have long intrigued those writing about ideological change in the USSR under Stalin. Many believe that the concessions to the church were an exigency of war designed to increase the party’s ability to rally support from among even the most reluctant members of Soviet society. Others consider the revival of the church to have been part of a more thoroughgoing Russification of the USSR in the mid- to late 1930s that rehabilitated aspects of the Russian national past for mobilizational purposes well before 1941. In *Stalin's Holy War*, Steven Merritt Miner proposes to refine such broad explanations through an analysis of the timing and nature of the church’s wartime resurgence. Noting that the church’s institutional resurrection occurred only in 1943 and that the vast majority of church reopenings occurred in formerly occupied territories in Ukraine and Belorussia, Miner argues that Russian Orthodoxy played a role that was more imperial and diplomatic than Russian per se. The church, as in tsarist times, served as an instrument of central control, helping the USSR consolidate gains made against the Germans after the victory at Stalin-grad. As the Red Army reclaimed territory, Ukrainian and Belorussian parishes that had been reopened under the Nazis were turned over to the Moscow patriarchate in order to rein in communities that had been wrenched from the Soviet orbit in 1941.

An institution of imperial administration, the church also took part in a diplomatic offensive launched at about the same time. This campaign used the church to court public opinion in the United States and Britain, reassuring the USSR’s erstwhile allies that Soviet society was not as militantly atheistic as many believed. Intriguingly, the massive publishing effort surrounding the church’s revival appears to have been intended chiefly for foreign consumption in order to assuage fears that the Red Army’s advance into Europe would serve purely Communist objectives.

Miner is wise to draw attention to the revival of church institutions in 1943 and persuasively demonstrates that their bureaucratic power was harnessed to aid the Soviet cause in the former borderlands and abroad in the years thereafter. Somewhat less convincing is Miner’s tendency to downplay the role that the church played in domestic mobilizational efforts earlier in the war (pp. 6–11, 78–83, etc.). Recent research on the wane of anti-religious campaigns during the interwar period indicates

that the gradual rehabilitation of the church began as early as the mid-to-late 1930s (see S. V. Bakhrushin's groundbreaking "K voprosu o kreshchenii Rusi," *Istoriik-Marksist*, No. 2 [1937], pp. 40–77). This revival accelerated after the start of the Nazi invasion in 1941 when religious vocabulary (e.g., "Holy War") became a central element of Soviet mass culture, appearing everywhere from popular song books to the front page of *Pravda*. Intended to harness religious feelings among ordinary Russians on the home front, this imagery—along with a greater tolerance for religion itself—should be seen as part of a populist line designed to cultivate dormant Russian patriotic sentiments in the name of national defense.

As Soviet fortunes improved in early 1943, official priorities shifted from popular mobilization to the restoration of centralized, bureaucratic control. Miner's work reflects this shift, insofar as it focuses more on the institutional history of the Russian Orthodox Church at war than it does on the Soviet co-option of popular religiosity or Russian national iconography. Ultimately, *Stalin's Holy War* complements our understanding of how the church helped mobilize the Russian home front with insightful analysis on how it served as a tool of Soviet influence both in Eastern Europe and beyond.

